

NAS

—

Teaches Hip-Hop Storytelling



MasterClass

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Nas, standing far right

MEET YOUR INSTRUCTOR:



The New York–bred rapper is a living monument to the power of words



Nas was born into music. His father, Olu Dara, is a cornetist who established himself as a respected member of the jazz community in the 1970s, but the roots run deeper than that.

Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones was born in 1973 and raised in the largest housing project in the United States: Queensbridge, a development in Queens, New York, that stretches six blocks and encompasses ninety-six buildings. He showed some early promise on the trumpet; it didn't stick, but his love of music was hard-wired. And while his education went no further than eighth grade, his curiosity was infinite.

In the early 1980s, crack cocaine burned its way through America. Nas lived at ground zero, where stabbings, shootouts, and robberies were as commonplace as the rangy trees lining the walkways. At the same time, another phenomenon was sweeping through the country: rap music.

The mid-1980s birthed landmark albums by New York–based hip-hop artists like Run-DMC, Whodini, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, Salt-N-Pepa, and more—and as young Nas fed his love of hip-hop, inspiration was right next door: Producer Marley Marl and rappers Roxanne Shante, MC Shan, and Craig G all lived in Queensbridge. Their success lit the way for Nas, who, at eighteen years old, introduced himself to the world with a preternaturally assured guest verse on a song called “Live at the Barbeque” by the New York/Toronto-based hip-hop group Main Source. From the beginning, Nas’s verbal agility was unmistakable.

Nas knew that words matter, that they could grab a listener’s attention and refuse to let go. And he knew that he wanted to illuminate his world in all its violent and beautiful complexity.

“The moment you press play,” he says, “I want to take you through the sounds right where I was at, right where New York was at, where Queens was at, where Queensbridge was at, where America was at.”

As it turned out, the world was all ears. Today Nas is one of hip-hop’s most respected and successful artists, often cited as one of the greatest rappers of all time. He has collaborated with American rappers and singer-songwriters like Jay-Z, Timbaland, Alicia Keys, Dr. Dre, and Lauryn Hill. He’s sold more than 12 million albums, garnered fourteen Grammy nominations from America’s Recording Academy, and performed his debut album, *Illmatic*—which American online music publication *Pitchfork*, in a perfect-10 review, called “an example of how great rap can be”—at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., with the city’s National Symphony Orchestra. He’s also an accomplished actor, a veteran film producer, and an astute businessman.

Nas wants to show you where he’s coming from, how he creates, and what pushes him. Inspiration can come from anywhere, but for him, it always comes back to one thing: rendering the world in words.

“The universe is listening,” he says. “It’s your world.”



Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five



The Notorious B.I.G.



Run-DMC



A Brief History of Hip-Hop

The rap saga is vast. This quick primer will help you understand Nas's role in it



The Origins

In the early 1970s, New York City bore witness to the birth of a new sound. Scholars and fans still debate hip-hop's precise origins, but most agree that the foundation was built by Black American youth at block parties: community gatherings that featured DJs playing dance music on vinyl. DJs had begun using turntables like instruments: Jamaican-American DJ Kool Herc is credited as the first to extend percussive breaks (called "breakbeats," or simply "the breaks") using two copies of the same recording, and Grand Wizzard Theodore and Grandmaster Flash are considered the original practitioners of "scratching," or manipulating turntables to produce odd and unignorable sounds. DJs performed with emcees, the earliest among

them including New York's Coke La Rock and KC the Prince of Soul, whose improvised vocals renewed a long history of rhythmic talking over music in Black culture.

Hip-Hop Spreads Across the United States

In 1979, New Jersey-bred trio the Sugarhill Gang released the first commercially successful hip-hop song, "Rapper's Delight," which reached the Top 40 on the U.S. Billboard charts (America's most prominent tracker of popular songs) and propelled the genre into the national spotlight.

Going Global

By the early 1980s, hip-hop culture was gaining traction throughout America and beyond. Enterprising

artists began bringing new ideas and technologies to the form, including drum machines (especially the Roland TR-808), complex sampling (where producers incorporate snippets of existing recordings into their creations), evermore inventive lyrics, and broader integration of genres like electro music. The 1980s also saw hip-hop spread to a global audience, especially across the U.K., Japan, and Australia.

New-School Hip-Hop

In the mid-1980s, several hip-hop albums—from American artists Run-DMC, LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys and others—helped introduce what came to be called new-school hip-hop, which employed drum-machine beats, sonic minimalism, and pop-informed song structures.



Public Enemy's Chuck D



MF Doom



Megan Thee Stallion

The Golden Age

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many performers enjoyed huge mainstream success while bringing major innovations. Key U.S. artists include Public Enemy, Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G., Boogie Down Productions, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, Wu-Tang Clan, and, of course, Nas. The era also saw the rise of gangsta rap, with American artists like Schoolly D, Ice-T, and N.W.A. voicing the trials of inner-city youth. Meanwhile, artists from other countries proved that rap wasn't an exclusively American art form: In the late 1980s, English emcee Derek B had multiple singles on UK pop charts, and France's MC Solaar guested on the internationally acclaimed 1993 album *Jazzmatazz*, volume 1, by Massachusetts rapper Guru.

The Commercial Revolution

By the late 1990s, hip-hop was firmly established in the global pop pantheon. This era was ruled by high-profile American artists like Timbaland, Nelly, Puff Daddy (now known as Diddy), Jay-Z, Ja Rule, DMX, Eminem, and 50 Cent. In 1995, America's Recording Academy added a new Grammy for Best Rap Album; New Jersey trio Naughty by Nature was the first to take home the coveted golden gramophone.

Alternative Hip-Hop

In the 2000s, many performers incorporated heavier influences from genres like punk, jazz, indie rock, and electronica. Notable artists include London-born rapper MF Doom and American rappers Kanye West, Kid Cudi, and Kendrick Lamar.

Contemporary Hip-Hop

The rise of internet distribution and streaming services at the turn of the century created an explosion of artists, mixtapes, and experimentation. American rappers that have come to prominence in recent years include Waka Flocka Flame, Cardi B, Future, Migos, Travis Scott, Megan Thee Stallion, and Lil Uzi Vert.



Nas's father, Olu Dara



Nas

Nas's Sonic Evolution

A journey through the artist's creative development via several of his 13 albums*



James Brown



***Illmatic* (1994)**

Nas's debut album arrived smack in the middle of the American West Coast's gangsta rap dominance. While Los Angeles superproducer Dr. Dre delivered albums that paired confrontational rhymes with crisp, funk-driven production (his own *The Chronic* and Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* among them), *Illmatic* evokes the danger and grit of New York's streets both lyrically and sonically. The album's producers—DJ Premier, Pete Rock, Large Professor,

Q-Tip, and L.E.S.—also hail from New York, and the beats they contributed hearken back to the stripped-down production that defined 1980s New York rap.

With its sampling of early emcees and its embrace of new recording technologies, *Illmatic* served as an update of rap's so-called golden age—a period that began in the late 1980s and saw the release of several albums still considered to be among the genre's best. Lyrically, *Illmatic* brought a reflective mood to hip-hop:

On "Life's a Bitch," Nas weighs the benefits of a drink against those of a lottery ticket—a keen meditation on a culture of bleak prospects and limited options.

***It Was Written* (1996)**

For his second album, Nas and American producing duo Poke and Tone opted for a relatively clean, radio-ready sound. "Street Dreams" samples "Sweet Dreams" by British pop duo the Eurythmics, and "If I Ruled the World" features vocals by

* In addition to the 13 albums credited solely to Nas, the artist has also released collaborative albums, collections, informal "mixtapes" and more.



Nas with his father



Nas's daughter, Destiny Jones



Kool Moe Dee



Dr. Dre

Lauryn Hill, American singer-songwriter and erstwhile member of the Haitian American hip-hop group the Fugees (whose smash-hit album *The Score* came out the same year).

I Am... and Nastradamus (1999)

Both *I Am...* and *Nastradamus* continued on the pop-leaning course set by *It Was Written*. American hit-maker Timbaland produced the *Nastradamus* track “You Owe Me,” adding guest vocals by platinum-selling American singer-songwriter

Ginuwine—whose smash hit “Pony” was also produced by Timbaland.

Stillmatic (2001)

As its name suggests, *Stillmatic* proved that Nas could still summon the brooding power of his first album. For standout track “One Mic,” American producer Chucky Thompson composed a symphony of gunshots, sirens, and crashing percussion leading into a whispered chorus—a bold choice that proved Nas wasn’t simply resting on his laurels.

God's Son (2002)

The death of Nas’s mother in 2002 informed the slower, more reflective moments on *God’s Son*, which arrived that same year. The elegiac track “Dance” features horns by Nas’s father, jazz cornetist Olu Dara.

Hip Hop Is Dead (2006)

By the mid-2000s, the languid sounds of Southern rap had been ruling the airwaves for years, led by artists like Ludacris (representing Atlanta, Georgia), Lil Wayne (New



Lauryn Hill



Q-Tip



Amy Winehouse



I felt like there had to be something out there. It was in my bones: I knew that I was here for something. I think we all are.”—Nas

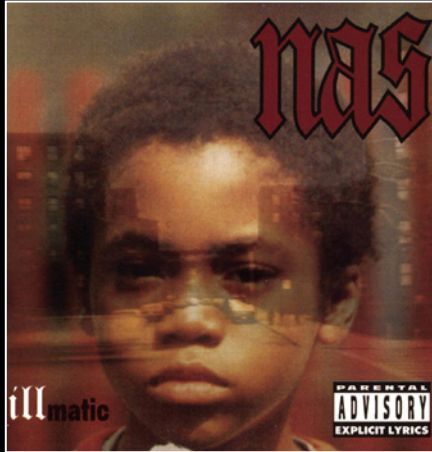
Orleans, Louisiana), and UGK (Houston, Texas). Nas reasserted his love of old-school rap with *Hip Hop Is Dead*, whose single “Where Are They Now” features shout-outs to rap forefathers like Kool Moe Dee (New York), King Sunny Adé (Oso-gbo, Nigeria), and Lakim Shabazz (Newark, New Jersey). On the title track, American producer and Black Eyed Peas member will.i.am samples classic 1970s funk recordings while Nas charts rap’s evolution from a street culture to a pop fixture.

***Life Is Good* (2012)**

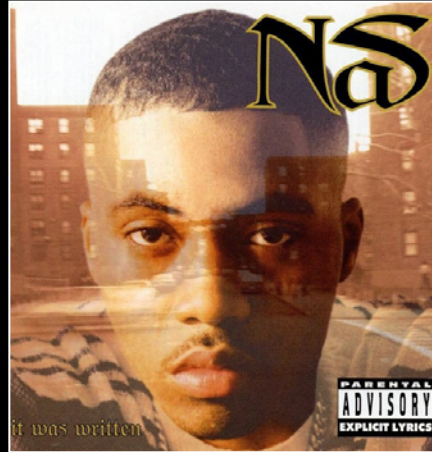
Nas’s more-recent work suggests an artist who has freed himself from expectations. *Life Is Good* has a relatively optimistic feel, even as Nas expresses such real-world concerns as his daughter’s social-media habits. The soulful “Cherry Wine” features posthumous vocals by young British chanteuse Amy Winehouse, who had died the year before.

***King’s Disease* and *King’s Disease II* (2020, 2021)**

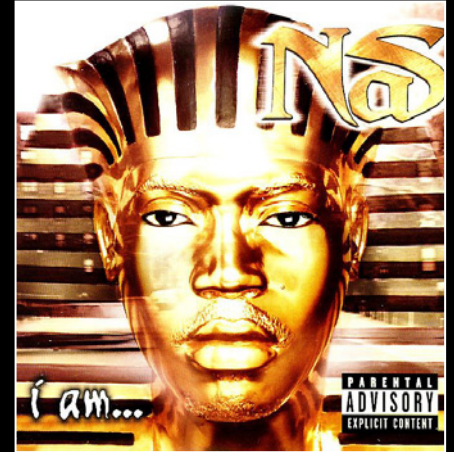
Nas partnered with California-bred millennial producer Hit-Boy for *King’s Disease* and *King’s Disease II*. Made mostly without samples, the songs on both albums are shorter than a typical Nas track, a reflection of the genre’s drift toward tighter arrangements that had begun in the early 2010s. Such choices prove that Nas can seamlessly incorporate fresh ideas into his singular style—innovating and integrating all at once.



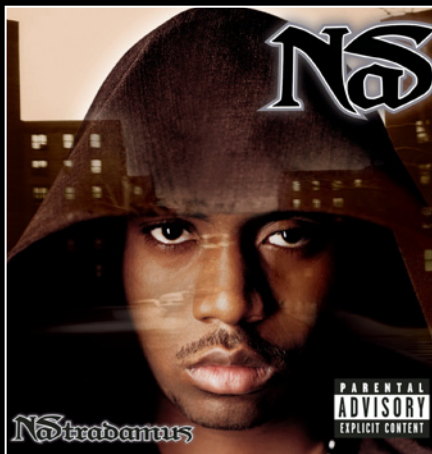
Illmatic, 1994



It Was Written, 1996



I Am, 1999



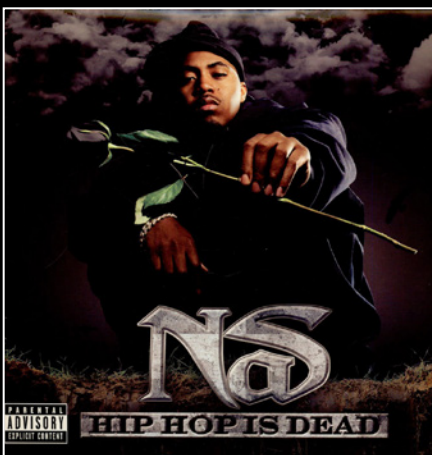
Nastradamus, 1999



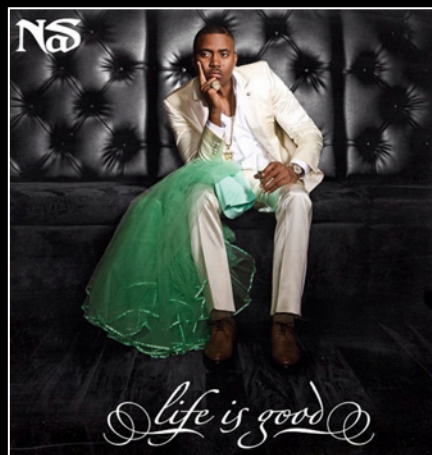
Stillmatic, 2001



God's Son, 2002



Hip Hop Is Dead, 2006



Life Is Good, 2012



King's Disease, 2020



21 Street
Queensbridge

Queensbridge Royalty

- ▶ Meet four artists from New York's Queensbridge Houses who inspired a young Nas

21st Street-Queensbridge subway station



Marley Marl

One of rap's first superproducers, Marl made groundbreaking, sample-driven beats, working with neighbors Roxanne Shante, MC Shan, and Craig G. He also teamed up with American artists Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap & DJ Polo, and Biz Markie, and at the end of the decade he coproduced New York rapper LL Cool J's blockbuster album *Mama Said Knock You Out*.



Craig G

A master of improvised "freestyles," Craig G recorded his "Shout" single when he was in seventh grade. He appears on "The Symphony," a Marley Marl track that also features seminal American rappers Masta Ace, Kool G Rap, and Big Daddy Kane and is widely considered one of the first and best "posse" cuts (essentially, a song featuring verses by a number of rappers). A sample of his voice is used on the *Illmatic* song "Memory Lane (Sittin' in da Park)."



Roxanne Shante

This fierce battle rapper became a superstar in 1984 with the Marley Marl-produced track "Roxanne's Revenge." The song is an "answer" record to New York hip-hop group UTFO's "Roxanne, Roxanne," in which the "stuck-up" titular temptress snubs UTFO's members. In reality, Shante wasn't *that* Roxanne, but she jump-started her career by assuming the role. The 2017 Netflix biopic *Roxanne Roxanne* tells her extraordinary life story.



MC Shan

An early rap luminary, Shan celebrated Queensbridge on his 1987 single "The Bridge." He bemoaned the dangers of drug abuse on "Jane, Stop This Crazy Thing" and probed heartbreak on "Left Me Lonely," displaying a gift for vivid storytelling that would eventually be taken up by Nas. Shan was also known for wearing sporty clothes whose popularity would soon spread far and wide—a sign of hip-hop's emerging role as a fashion bellwether.

“

You need to describe the emotions of whoever's in your story. You need to describe their goals, their setbacks.”

—Nas



The Nas Method

Eight ways to jump-start and turbo-charge your songwriting



After thirty years in the music business, Nas still craves creating. “I’m excited every time I’m about to create a song,” he says. “It’s like this world that I step into.”

So how does he do it? And how are you supposed to do it? Here are some practical suggestions drawn from Nas’s life and career.

Imitate

As a kid, Nas and his friends would sing and rap along with the hits of the day. From there, they could start to plug in words of their own, drawing inspiration from their lives. Pick a favorite song of yours and give it a try.

Observe

Gather cultural artifacts—movies, brands, overheard conversations, bits of jargon—as you go through your days and jot them down in a notebook or your smartphone. Once you sit down to start writing a song, all of these observations will be at your fingertips, a treasure trove for

whenever you need to make a relatable reference.

Group Your Ideas

Young Nas would organize his ideas by theme. Take a page out of his book: In your journal or smartphone, try grouping your observations as romantic stirrings, money woes, aspirations, and so on.

Compose on the Go

Nas says that “words need to taste like clear, fresh water in your mouth.” Your phone’s voice-recording app (or an old school tape recorder) is handy when you’d rather recite than write.

Pick a Word

Sometimes an unusual word choice can birth a song. So try this: Think of a word that’s at least three syllables; now think of a word that rhymes with your first word (the second word can be any number of syllables); now string those rhymes together with two lines that make sense out of the word pairing, and

you’re off and running toward a new composition.

Challenge Yourself

If you get stuck, try to build a verse out of the first crazy thought that comes to mind. That’s how Nas conceived “Rewind,” which famously tells a story backward.

Cull

Once you have some lyrics going, take a step back. Which lines excite you, and which ones leave you cold? Could your favorite line become the first line of the song? Keep selecting, cutting, and shifting until you’re happy with every line. For Nas, this process continues even when he’s in the vocal booth.

Connect

Remember the goal: vivid stories and emotions. Make sure your song has a beginning, middle, and end—even if you change up the order. Keep your lyrics connected to your five senses and your heart.

► SONGS OF SALVATION

He may be have made his name depicting stark urban landscapes, but Nas has always delivered uplifting lines. Here are a few of his most positive moments—keep them in mind when you’re writing your own music

“THE WORLD IS YOURS”

In this popular cut from *Illmatic*, angst-filled verses lead to the titular refrain, offering the hope of agency even amid great struggle. Nas extols present joys like writing lyrics and looks hopefully to the horizon, imagining a better life for his future son.

“I CAN”

Backed by a chorus of girls delivering an affirmative chant, Nas encourages young female listeners to eschew drugs and take care of their bodies. The *God’s Son* track generally invites kids to live their dreams, adding that everything worth doing requires hard work.

“BYE BABY”

Nas reckons with the end of an intimate relationship in this track from the 2012 album, *Life Is Good*. It’s brutally honest, but he still manages to end on a high note that plays off of the album’s title.



Wordplay

A deeper look at four of Nas's go-to linguistic devices



Metaphor and Simile

A metaphor is a word or expression that invites comparison between two different things. In the *Illmatic* song “It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” Nas envisions his head as a juicy breakfast favorite with the line, “Wisdom be leaking out my grapefruit.” Later in the song, he offers a double simile—essentially a metaphor with the addition of the word *like*: “Begin like a violin, end like Leviathan.”

Slang

“I use slang to speak directly to the audience that created hip-hop,” Nas says, “the audience that loves hip-hop.” To cite one classic example, *Illmatic*’s “N.Y. State of Mind” contains the popular phrase, “Y’all know my steelo,” where *steelo* is slang for style.

Double Entendre and Homophones

For Nas, words often carry two meanings at once. In the line “Bullet holes left in my peepholes,” also from “N.Y. State of Mind”, the last word sounds almost identical to *peoples*.

Proper Names

Citing brands and works of art is a quick way to make points about culture and class. In a few brief lines from the 2006 song “Hip Hop Is Dead,” Nas references the 1984 breakdancing film *Beat Street*, McDonald’s fast food, and the popular cosmetic injection known as Botox.



Start a Song With Your Senses

Review Chapter 2: Telling Your Life Story Through Music, in which Nas instructs you to “find the details in everything.” Draft a single verse of a new song that touches upon all five senses. Start to tell a story in rhyme—it can be dramatic or mundane, real or made up—and as you do so, sketch a world that your listeners can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Don’t worry about the music for now, but if it helps, search YouTube for instrumental hip-hop beats as accompaniment.

YOU'RE STILL A **SOLDIER,**
I'M **LIKE SLY STONE**
IN COBRA
PACKIN' LIKE A RASTA
IN THE WEED SPOT

—"IT AIN'T HARD TO TELL"

●
METAPHOR/
SIMILE

●
SLANG

●
DOUBLE
ENTENDRE

●
PROPER
NAMES



Hip-Hop as Storytelling

Four rap songs with irresistibly inventive storylines



Nas has always been known as an exceptional storyteller. It's a reputation that goes beyond his gift for vivid descriptions that engage all five senses: In some of his best work, classic narrative structures are both wielded and deconstructed. Take "I Gave You Power," in which Nas raps from the perspective of a gun, or "Rewind," whose plot runs backward in time.

As a hip-hop fabulist, Nas is in good company. Here are four more classic tracks that make masterful use of narrative structure.

"Rapper's Delight"

On this, the first-ever commercially successful rap song, American hip-hop group Sugarhill Gang's three emcees deliver playfully boastful rhymes for more than fifteen minutes. But they don't stop at braggadocio: They spin hilariously detailed yarns about hitting on girls—and then there's that legendary verse about a meal so foul that the narrator flees by busting through a closed door.

"Nightmares"

This 1985 selection by larger-than-life American rapper Dana Dane takes the form of a therapy session. Dane tells the female Dr. Slumber about a recurring dream in which he is pursued by the shape-shifting and extremely tenacious Anita the Beast. By the end we don't know whether the rapper is still sleeping or trapped in a living nightmare.



“You Must Learn”

Bringing some U.S. history to the form, Bronx emcee KRS-One highlights the accomplishments of Black inventors Benjamin Banneker (who created one of America’s first almanacs), Granville Tiler Woods (who made groundbreaking contributions to the invention of the telephone and was often referred to as the “Black Edison”), Lewis Latimer (who developed an evaporative air conditioner, among other things), and others on this 1989 single.

“Stan”

This epistolary 2002 classic from American rapper Eminem is mostly narrated by a die-hard Eminem devotee who descends into madness after his fan letters go unanswered. The twist delivered in the last few lines is worthy of film legend Alfred Hitchcock. Following the song’s release, *stan* quickly became part of the common lexicon—a way of saying “obsessed fan” that ranges far beyond the hip-hop community.



Experiment With Structure

What is your favorite movie that uses unconventional storytelling? Is it American auteur Orson Welles’s 1941 masterpiece *Citizen Kane*, told almost entirely in flashbacks? Is it 2000’s *Amores Perros*, in which Mexican writer-director Alejandro González Iñárritu juggles three primary plotlines? Is it the *Matrix* saga, kicked off in 1999 by American filmmakers Lana and Lilly Wachowski, in which the very nature of reality is called into question? Pick one such film and meditate on why its narrative methods interest you. Now start another verse, and this time adopt your chosen movie’s unconventional structure. This won’t be easy; if you get stuck, just revisit Nas’s “Rewind” and observe what he was able to accomplish via one simple structural twist.

The Producer-Emcee Dynamic

Producers make rap possible—but what exactly do they do?



According to Nas, “The role of the producer is to take the artist, what he or she is going through or what’s heavy on their hearts, and bring it to life.”

Producers are responsible for placing a rapper’s rhymes in the right landscape. Some create full backing tracks in advance of the vocal sessions; others work in tandem with rappers, shaping sounds while the vocals are recorded. Their tools are analog and digital, live and programmed, melodic and ambient—in other words, unlimited.

Branching Out

Early in his career, Nas worked with New York City rapper and producer Large Professor, who produced the 1992 single, “Halftime,” and three tracks from *Illmatic*. Once that album established Nas as a major presence in the rap world, his horizons expanded: For his sophomore album, he worked with Los Angeles’s Dr. Dre, who at that time was arguably the most successful and acclaimed producer alive. As Nas’s star rose, he continued to choose among the top names in the producer pantheon.

Collaborative Efforts

The nature of the artist-producer relationship is especially pronounced on the songs that American producer Salaam Remi worked on for Nas’s 2002 album, *God’s Son*. Remi, who has also worked on major pop albums by Haitian-American hip-hop group the Fugees and American singer-songwriter Fergie, knew just how to complement the introspective lyrics Nas was writing: The main

melodic element of “I Can” is Beethoven’s timeless classical piece “Für Elise.”

More recently, Nas formed a potent creative partnership with Hit-Boy, who hails from Southern California and is fourteen years younger than Nas. Regardless of their age difference, the two feed off of each other’s ideas, creating and refining in real time.

Producers and You

If you’re an aspiring emcee, you can connect with producers by mingling at concerts and record stores, scouring music sites where independent artists post their work, and sending direct messages to people whose tracks you like. It’s a process that often involves false starts and dead ends, but don’t lose hope—you need only one person to believe in you and your music.

Of course, most producers won’t work with you without hearing you first. That may sound like a paradox, but consider that many rappers are their own producers. If you want to explore that route, start by creating your own soundscapes using whatever resources you have. Many computers include home-recording



Nas and Hit-Boy



Write a Biography in Rhyme

In 2004, Nas celebrated one of his favorite rappers—pioneering New York emcee Rakim—with the song “U.B.R. (Unauthorized Biography Of Rakim).” Who is your favorite musical artist? Your challenge is to write the first verse of their unauthorized biography in rhyme. “U.B.R.” is loaded with facts, and yet it seems to flow effortlessly. Songwriting involves a lot of free association, but this assignment is about processing information lyrically and rhythmically.

applications with their built-in software. Or go even simpler: Use your phone or a basic recording device to track yourself beatboxing (simulating beats using your mouth) or banging on household items. It doesn’t have to be fancy or high tech; it just has to anchor your lyrics.

Once you have a decent recording, you can share it with the producers you meet—if you haven’t discovered that the dream producer is you.



Clockwise from top right:
Q-Tip, Large Professor,
Pete Rock, DJ Premier,
Dr. Dre, Hit-Boy

PRODUCERS: BRINGING WORDS TO LIFE

► Nas has worked with some of rap's greatest producers. Meet six of them

LARGE PROFESSOR

The Queens, New York producer featured Nas (then known as Nasty Nas) on Main Source's song "Live at the Barbeque" in 1991. He and Nas worked on the latter's pre-*Illmatic* solo material and *Illmatic*, plus several standout selections on Nas's 2001 LP, *Stillmatic*.

DJ PREMIER

The Texas native was one-half of the revered rap group Gang Starr and has produced several of Jay-Z's and the Notorious B.I.G.'s

most acclaimed songs. "N.Y. State of Mind" stands as one of his best Nas collaborations.

Q-TIP

The front man of American hip-hop group A Tribe Called Quest produced *Illmatic*'s "One Love," which features Nas writing letters to incarcerated friends. Q-Tip also worked on American hip-hop duo Mobb Deep's lauded 1995 LP, *The Infamous*, as well as his own solo material.

PETER ROCK

In the early 1990s, the Mount Vernon, New York-bred producer was known as the King of Remixes: His versions of popular singles from American hip-hop groups House Of Pain, Public Enemy, and others were often as revered as the originals. Pete Rock crafted the *Illmatic* single "The World Is Yours."

DR. DRE

The prolific California beatsmith's bouncy, hook-heavy work has helped define rap for generations.

For Nas's 1996 album, *It Was Written*, Dre produced (and lent vocals to) "Nas Is Coming."

HIT-BOY

After crafting the 2004 hit "Trophies" for Canadian superstar Drake and 2011's "Ni**as in Paris" for American rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West, this California rapper-producer teamed up with Nas for his albums *King's Disease* (2020) and *King's Disease II* (2021).



Bronx Park jam, 1984

Glossary: 11 Common Hip-Hop Terms

1. Bars

Bars refer to rap lyrics, but they can also be part of a compliment: If an emcee has “got bars,” they have talent in rhyming or improvisation. The word is derived from the music theory definition of bars, which are segments of time in a composition that contain a specific number of beats.

2. Battle

A hip-hop contest in which two or more rappers, dancers, or DJs showcase their improvisation talents before an assembled crowd; the crowd then determines a winner based on skill and prowess. Rappers

display their creativity with spontaneous lyrics, especially put-downs (“disses”), while dance battles involve break dancing in one-on-one or team face-offs. In DJing battles, opponents show off their turntabling techniques.

3. Beat

The rhythmic element of rap. *Beat* can refer to a song’s percussive part, such as the drum pattern that gives the track its particular rhythm, or the track’s broader rhythmic structure, including some melodic elements.

4. Break

An instrumental element—usually sampled from another recording—that repeats or “loops” throughout a hip-hop song. Breaks are typically isolated drum or percussion parts, also known as breakbeats; the most famous of these is American drummer Clyde Stubblefield’s riff from American soul powerhouse James Brown’s single “Funky Drummer.” Breaks can also refer to any repetitive element of a song, such as the bassline from American R&B group Chic’s “Good Times” as used in American hip-hop trio Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.”

5. Emcee

Synonymous with rapper, *emcee* represents the pronunciation of MC, which stands for *master of ceremonies*.

6. Flow

The interplay between rhyme and rhythm in a hip-hop vocal performance. *Flow* also refers to the rapper’s skill at delivering the song’s verses within its rhythmic structure.

7. Freestyle

An approach to rap wherein the emcee disregards thematic coher-

ence in favor of stylistic flair; also the act of improvising lyrically. Freestyling in the latter sense can be observed at live rap battles, where emcees demonstrate their skills by trading verbal jabs in rhyme.

8. GOAT

An acronym for Greatest of all Time. The term, often used in rap debates, has been applied to many prominent rappers—including, of course, Nas.

9. Lyrics

Rap lyrics often include a rhyming element, and the pattern in which the lyrics rhyme is the rhyme scheme (see below).

10. Rhyme scheme

The cadence of rhyming words. Rap rhyme schemes can be simple four-line patterns, in which the first and second lines form a rhyming couplet, as do the third and fourth lines; you can write this pattern as AABB. Different rhyme schemes include the alternate rhyme (ABAB), in which the first and third lines rhyme, and the monorhyme (AAAA), in which all lines rhyme.

11. Verse

The fundamental building block of a rap song. A verse is frequently composed of sixteen rap bars, or rhyming lines, followed by a chorus or “hook” that reiterates the song’s main theme or furnishes an attention-grabbing moment. Some songs also contain a bridge: a linking element in the song structure with a different delivery or rhythm that follows some verses.



Complete One Song

By now you should have written three verses: one that engages all five senses, one that uses unconventional story structure, and the beginning of the unauthorized biography. Review them now. Which one feels the most alive? Which one feels like “clear, fresh water in your mouth,” to quote Nas? Take that verse and build two or three on top of it. Practice performing them, and then record the whole thing—with or without a beat, on your phone or using recording software on your computer. Congratulations: You have written a song.

IMAGES OF NAS IN THE STUDIO

Photographs by Lisa Leone

CLIPS FROM BEAT STREET

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**IMAGE OF NAS AND
LARGE PROFESSOR**

Photograph by Piotr Sikora

**IMAGE OF NAS,
LARGE PROFESSOR, AND
DJ PREMIER; IMAGE OF NAS
AND PETE ROCK**

Photographs Rachelle Clinton

**NEWS FOOTAGE ABOUT
THE CRACK EPIDEMIC**

Courtesy PIX11

**LIVE PERFORMANCE OF
“LIVE AT THE BARBEQUE”
FROM VIDEO MUSIC BOX**

Courtesy Ralph McDaniels /
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**IMAGE OF DJ PREMIER
(CLASS GUIDE)**

Photograph by Jonathan Mannion

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IMAGES OF YOUNG NAS

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